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'Girl talk' redefined

HAIRDRESSERS RECRUITED TO FIGHT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

By Truong Phuoc Khanh

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No other public setting invites intimacy like that of the hair salon, a place where secrets are shared and confidences exchanged. Capitalizing on the sisterhood of stylists and clients, San Jose is recruiting hairdressers in its campaign to reach an often isolated group: battered women.

The Hairdresser's Project, piloted earlier this year, resumes its outreach effort this month, once again using San Jose State University student interns to knock on the doors of hair and nail salons and even some barbershops. Better than billboards and more personal than a public service announcement, hairdressers also often speak the language of their clients.

San Jose is the first Bay Area city to link a government agency, a domestic violence advocacy group and cosmetologists in a public campaign against what, for many, is still a private shame.

"Your clients come to you and tell you things they wouldn't tell a friend. There is a lot of trust," said Gina Garcia, owner of Halo Salon and Boutique in San Jose. "It's a comfort zone, it's girl time. You can come in and talk about anything."

In the decade that Garcia has been cutting hair, the San Jose stylist occasionally has seen bruised arms or hair missing from clients' scalps.

"You can feel your client. You know when something is wrong," said Garcia, 35, and mother of two. "It happens frequently and you don't really come out and ask, 'Is this happening in your home?'"

Instead of asking, Garcia discreetly leaves informational brochures listing crisis hotline numbers and shelter information in the changing room and restroom of her salon. The brochures are also printed in Spanish and Vietnamese.

Halo Salon was one of about 65 businesses that agreed to display crisis hotline cards (800) 799-SAFE (799-7233) from the Hairdresser's Project, which began in January and ended in May. Six college interns -- undergraduates and graduate students majoring in social work -- reached more than 100 beauty professionals in San Jose, which has 800 licensed hair and nail salon businesses.

“We know hairdressers wear many hats. They're counselors; they're therapists. What we didn't know was the intimate level and detail that people share,” said Eve Castellanos, San Jose's domestic violence prevention coordinator.

Castellanos trained the interns, whose work was supervised by Next Door Solutions to Domestic Violence, an advocacy agency for victims of domestic abuse.

Nearly one out of three American women report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to a 1998 Commonwealth Fund survey. Battering is the single largest cause of injury to women in the United States, according to a national violence against women survey.

Shellie Taylor considers herself a survivor.

“I tried to hide all the bruises. I'd lie about what happened to me: ‘Oh, I fell on the stairs. Oh, my son hit me with a bat,’” said Taylor, 34, of San Jose. “You feel embarrassed, ashamed, afraid. It was just an awful way to live for three years.”

So when she heard about the Hairdresser's Project, Taylor -- who is now happily married -- immediately signed up Phat EFX, a salon owned by her sister. Taylor is the salon's manager.

Many Phat EFX clients spend an entire day at the salon, Taylor said, and the proximity breeds familiarity. That hairdressers turn into confidants doesn't surprise her, Taylor said.

“You're trusting somebody with your hair, with your secrets,” said Taylor, “and you're trusting they will keep it to themselves.”

Unlike law enforcement officials or social workers, beauty professionals don't have to report abuses they see or hear about, which eases the fear victims commonly have of being reported to authorities.

There were salons that didn't want any part of the Hairdresser's Project, said intern Thuy Tran, who is studying for a master's degree in social work.

In the Vietnamese community, Tran said, “It's a hush-hush thing.”

The Hairdresser's Project, which doesn't aim to turn stylists into interventionists or counselors, is similar to a national campaign called Cut It Out, launched in 2003, which has trained nearly 1,000 beauty professionals in 11 states to recognize the signs of abuse in their clients, and how to respond.

All too often, the stereotypes of abuse victims focus on the obvious signs: black eyes, bruises, broken arms. But other symptoms of an abusive relationship, Castellanos said, include, “When your partner is threatening you, stalking you, controlling who you see, how you dress.”

For Castellanos, it's easy to see why San Jose spearheaded the Hairdresser's Project, which cost \$5,000 in materials.

``We're always talking about being one of the safest cities in America," Castellanos said.
``In order to be a safe city, we need to have safe homes."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To participate in the Hairdresser's Project, contact the city at: (408) 277-4000.

Contact Truong Phuoc Khanh at tkhanh@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-2729.